

Design and its future responsibilities

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Abstract

It would be naive to define what design will be like in the future, even if it were only within a few decades. The only thing we can do is to analyse the general ideas upon which the history of design subsists and project onto them the significant events which are shaping social behaviour and deduce their effects in the field of design projection. To this end, the traditional symbolic/utilitarian relationship which implies a society hierarchically divided into classes has been chosen. Evidently, throughout the course of the history of design, the balance between these values has fluctuated according to the socially prevalent cultures and ideologies in each era.

Currently, the phenomena of globalisation has emphasised this division whereas the serious political and military conflicts being undergone by humanity foretell huge economic and social changes which undoubtedly call for a redefinition of design practice.

Is it possible to say today what daily life will be like in the future, even just in a few decades? What will our social behaviour, our values, our ethics be like? The uncertainty is still greater if we endeavour to visualize material surroundings, with their forms and structures, or their prevalent colours.

The economic-political future and its social effects are another area about which little is known. Even when we exclude large future risks from our field of thought, such as natural disasters, international conflicts and so on, and limit ourselves to the experience of recent events, it is still risky to anticipate their consequences.

It is possible to suggest, however, that the post-industrial era that we are beginning, increasingly informed and globalized, constitutes a powerful tool of reality transformation. A reality yet to be seen, but which already brings forth a number of questions, be they of a political or ethical nature, and which will have to give collective, valid answers.

Within the framework of these uncertainties, design, like any form of social communication, must consider the acquisition of collective challenges and, overcoming its traditional individuality, become a social strategy capable of providing new norms of interpreting the world.

Social and design duality

Effectively, we are unable to define the future of design, but we can analyse the historical constants that have defined its culture, and verify its behaviour and projection in the light of the recent events and situations that are conditioning our social life because of their scope.

To that end, we have chosen as historical design constants the efforts of the human being to unite two traditionally disassociated worlds: that known as the world of «ideas» and the «utilitarian» world of daily life.

From its beginning, the world of ideas has belonged to artists and thinkers. A space that has represented art, thinking and religion, and which has produced the so-called «high culture». The second, opposed to the first,

is the world of daily life, directly linked to popular culture and almost always referred to as «low culture».

The dualism between these two worlds has always implied the idea of a society hierarchically divided into two classes. One; high, governing, intellectual, inspired and, in a way, participant in the supreme laws of the universe. And the other inferior, menial, working class and always subordinate to the first.

Within what is known as the «high class», art and scientific knowledge progressively acquired a paradigmatic value of prestige and culture through which groups who possessed them established their authority. On a lower, separated level, another class existed whose primordial aim was daily life know-how always following the orders of the inspired leaders of the high class.

This disassociation between the concepts of utility and art became total in the 18th century. Society simply required utilitarian values for the tools of work and survival at the same time as claiming, in objects of prestige, certain aesthetic and fine values which agreed with the scale of values defined according to its own social relationship needs.

This produced the existence of objects which were fundamentally utilitarian, simple, humble and with few aesthetic pretensions. Contrary to these there were another class of objects: artistic and lavish. Their primordial aim was to satisfy the desire of the rising bourgeoisie for beauty and ostentation. The first, the humble ones, responded to the real needs of survival and their value was exclusively utilitarian. The second, the lavish ones, simply responded to symbolic values and aesthetic criteria, bearing no relation with the structural needs of the new industrial society, and therefore being subject to progressive degradation.

From this perspective, it is possible to say that design the history of is still the history of the continuous attempts to create a balance between the symbolic value and use value that objects possess. Evidently, during the course of design history, the balance between these values has fluctuated according to the socially prevalent cultural and ideological trends of each era and also, albeit to a lesser extent, to the models which designers as individuals or groups have attached themselves to.

Industrialisation presupposes approach

The arrival of the machine and the industrial revolution highlighted the urgent need to harmonise industry's

productive demands and the demands of the public consumer. Following the dictums of the new industrial economy, design strove to create a new machine culture based on the serial production of objects which could fulfill the consumption needs of the masses, thereby making the contradiction between the two social classes more than evident.

Taking as a starting point the demands of industrial, nondifferentiated and serial production, and in spite of the expressed desire of the bourgeoisie to socially distinguish themselves by means of Modernism, until the end of the 20th century, industrial design provided an efficient means of bringing two worlds together: the symbolic world and the utilitarian world.

Two levels continue (globalized)

The appearance of new electronic technologies has created similar expectations to those experienced by 18th century society with the appearance of new methods of industrial production. Like the industrial revolution, current technologies are not only creating a large amount of new tools to facilitate work and satisfy new needs, but are also providing an extremely thorough method of production and planning which is significantly changing social behaviour. Once again, we find ourselves in need of making a qualitative jump, similar in size to that of industrialization, with its needs, its new methods and which, like then, demands deep thought and completely new solutions.

Alongside new technologies and the prospect of an economically globalized world, the ghost of a society split into two social groups, opposed and more distanced than ever, has resurfaced. The first world is governor of wealth and privilege, and opposite there is a world of need, poverty and misfortune.

The phenomenon of globalisation

At the dawn of the 21st century, we were witnesses to a powerful, vague, unpredictable and disconcerting phenomenon: globalisation. Like any other big issue, globalisation is an irreversible process which has irrefutably significant advantages, but also a number of sizeable dangers and drawbacks.

Globalisation is not necessarily a danger to progress, nor does it compulsorily attack individual freedom. However, it is not a magical cure for everything which is wrong. Globalisation is, in reality, a universal process which will have unimagined consequences.

In principle, globalisation should allow the integration of contradictory situations in the form of conflicting trends: favouring concentration and uniformity, and, at the same time, decentralisation and diversity. The resolution of these paradoxes would enrich our future, not only in social terms but also economically.

Nevertheless, the little we know about globalisation does not lead us to viewing it optimistically. The tendency to hallow money and economic power as the only criteria for social well-being, profitability and ethics, is not only dangerous but ill-fated.

Protected by the principles of the Enlightenment and human rights, we have been capable of building a fairer and more egalitarian society but, have we really defended these principles outside the western world? We have the financial and human means to be able to do so, and yet with globalisation we have not been capable of bringing our world closer to the so-called third world.

The excessive trust in the free development of market forces has certainly produced a type of globalisation which is capable of moulding the world, but it has not been able to distinguish between its good and bad effects. Economic globalisation does not seem to have the aim of putting an end to the serious problems that afflict humanity, or to restoring global strategies to eradicate the misery and injustice suffered in vast parts of the world.

Long awaited social improvement has instead become social confrontation of global dimensions. The citizen's ideal has been exchanged for the client's concept. It has undermined the State and politics, spreading generalised untrust and disillusionment.

Design is not impartial

Tomás Maldonado rightly recognises that movements of money have always conditioned and governed design initiatives. This was the case with the revolutionary proposals of the Russian Vchutemas and the reformist programme of the Bauhaus in Germany. Maldonado regrets that in both cases the battle of design was a lost one. The capitalism of the first postwar period and the

neocapitalism of the second adjusted their methodologies in order to adapt them to the policy of earnings. This is the framework within which we must analyse the expectations of design in the present and not too distant future.

Remaining loyal to the policy of consumerism and in need of increasing profits, design has made itself essential when it comes to sales planning, and it has become a tool of power for the masses.

Arising from the desire to adequate and subordinate surroundings to human needs, design has become a persuasive strategy which understands the object as a simple impulse for programmed and massified consumption. In the privileged world, design objects no longer compete because of their function but also because of their symbolic and differentiating qualities.

Subject to a fast innovation rhythm, the life cycles of products are increasingly shorter. In this context of more ephemeral and obsolete products, designers find themselves more obliged to respond to novelty, purchasing desire and prestige than to the quality of the product itself.

The consumption of symbols

Thus, from the industrially manufactured product with certain material qualities and features that define it as an attractive product, a move has been made towards a product exclusively characterised by its symbolic aspects. Products which were acquired for their material qualities and the features they offered have been exchanged for symbolic products, interpreted and acquired following an evaluation of their image and character, as well as the identity of the company which has produced them or even just distributed them.

The generalisation of goods and their constant innovation has led to a progressive demythologizing of objects and the unification of the market with products, which in terms of characteristics and features are virtually identical. It is because of this and market demands that the need to differentiate products with symbolic extras from the production of the rest has resurfaced. Once design again places itself beyond productivist and utilitarianist requirements in order to focus on the symbolic values of the product. Market evolution and consolidation enable differences beyond the product to be established, fostering the brand as a possible world within which the product gets its identity.

The current responsibility of design thus lies in the creation of an imaginary reference in which the product can be identified. By means of persuasive language, design places the consumer in a possible world and promotes the product's particular values, that is, what makes it different. Through this differentiation, the product enables a determined sensitivity to be identified and personalized.

In its deepest sense, current design follows similar methodologies to those found in artistic production, and strives to be dignified by means of the golden artisticification of what is added.

With more desire to enter the artistic system than concern about sociocultural problems, postmodern design, unlike art, has abandoned its reality interpretation attitude and has focussed on incorporating pre-existing formulae. It should come as no surprise then that these products do not enjoy the same credibility as artistic objects. While artistic proposals lead us to «seeing the world» through their interpretative filter, design merely leads us to «seeing the golden object» capable of generating artisticity something similar to what is «ready-made», and always with speculative and commercial aims.

Objects designed as being pseudoartistic, with their great symbolic weight and destined for opulent society, are once again opposed to utilitarian objects, non-designed, anonymous and considered as simple exchange objects to fulfill the basic needs of a society that can demand nothing.

In the so-called «first world», the aesthetic thinking derived from modernity and the economy has bestowed a metaphysical value on the term «design», so much so that it has been transformed into an identifier of quality and is attributed certain mediating functions between social demands and needs and the satisfaction of these by means of the designed object. Hence, the object with design connotations is progressively separating itself from many other industrial productions which are marginalized from the concept of design and which are rarely seen as cultural. These are necessary objects for the physical survival of individuals.

These non-designed objects are analysed from purely technological, economic and utilitarian perspectives, and are always left out of intellectual and aesthetic consideration and research and its ideological formulations. These products, which make up almost all of the living environment of the needing classes, are degraded to simple consumer objects which do not deserve to be carriers of culture.

Once again, design finds itself on the crux of two classes: that which has its basic needs covered and which looks to consumer objects to provide identity signs which allow communication and identification with other beings in the surroundings, and that which must assimilate objects for less subjective ends, that is, in order to cover basic needs. Although opposed, these two design alternatives are not always, but rather, often coexist immersed in the same society. In their own way, both are governed by notions of style and above all by markets. And furthermore they are transmitted through the same channels and massmedia.

Utilitarian need

The forecasts of design for the purposes of an advanced, post-industrial and computerized society reveal that they are not in tune with global reality and display certain forecasts in direct contrast to the United Nations' latest report about Human Development. According to this report, four fifths of the world population live in poverty and, as regards the use of basic technology to provide a way out of misery, we see that «currently, two thousand million people still do not have electricity (...). 80% of Internet users are in developed countries. The international broadband total for the entire continent of Africa is less than that of the city of Sao Paulo in Brazil. The broadband total for Latin America is similar to that of Seoul (South Korea)».

In light of this evidence it is clear that when we talk about the «future of humanity», we are only making reference to a very small and privileged minority. In global terms, this near future, is very distant for the vast majority.

Recovering Gui Bonsiepe's pilot experience

Opposing this privileged world exists another underdeveloped world in which the role of industrial design is somewhat confused and, due to its ineffectiveness, it is even difficult to justify.

Design, albeit virtually inexistent in the third world, has unsuccessfully endeavoured to solve the problems created by the lack of suitable resources and technologies. Beyond these frustrated efforts, in my opinion, it is absolutely vital to recover a pilot experience carried out by the Industrial Design Group in the Committee of

Technological Research (INTEC/CORFO) in Santiago de Chile and supported by Salvador Allende's government.

In spite of the brevity of this experience owing to the dictator Pinochet's coup d'état, the project outlined the foundations of a technological policy with views to overcoming the state of dependancy of third world countries on the large worldwide powers.

For the first time, this pilot experience gave a clear function to project activities in underdeveloped countries. The programme, led by Gui Bonsiepe, aimed to define a technological policy, not only in general terms, but interns which were both concrete and feasible, as well as setting up institutional bases to create technology and establishing criteria for the selection and purchase of foreign technology.

The programme's prime target was to make concrete, feasible contributions to overcoming the technological dependance in the industrial manufacture sector. At the same time, research was undertaken into the possibility of saving on costs whilst satisfying the major needs through the development of products of high use value and low price value. A rational use of existing industrial capacity and the standardisation of components would enable costs to be reduced, which together with the rationalisation of the range of products should facilitate the creation of a material culture of their own.

The military involvement in the coup d'état which led to dictatorship and the political and economic dependancy of the country meant that the project could not be completed. However, it was a sufficiently significant and promising experience to justify an attempt to update and complement it. Its proposals are still valid and certainly necessary in many underdeveloped countries.

Recent events

It would be imprudent to attempt to analyse possible future situations without paying attention to what is happening in our surroundings, albeit in the full knowledge that we can not automatically impose present conclusions on the future. It is more than likely that some current problems will disappear and new ones will arise.

Our natural tendency to categorise changes as problems and crisis as catastrophes often does not take into account the fact that changes and crises, given their dual

nature, represent as much of a danger as the chance to make improvements. The fatalist view of change must be offset with a disposition which sees problems as situations favouring development and evolution.

Among recent events with unforeseen and global consequences, what took place on the 11th September last year in New York stand out due to their future transcendancy. Like all historical events, it is possible that these, being singular, will not change the direction of history, but they will speed it up. Like catalyst processes in progress, this type of event normally obliges us to respond with greater speed concerning the direction and effects that they have.

The magnitude of these events has generated a series of talks and propositions regarding an incipient new world order, whose of values scale, has no place for optimism for the moment. These propositions, mainly made by intellectuals, experts and politicians, have not particularly sensitized economic leaders and their companies, above all if we bear in mind that the more number of global companies are, the greater is their connection to movements of the world and society.

For Alain Touraine, 11-S has been a lost chance to implant a new agenda and globally negotiate a new social contract with the aim of achieving a better world. We are in a state of «more globalisation, but less integration».

What 11-S has certainly brought about is a sudden end to preceding democratization attempts. At the same time, a new social landscape is being shaped and must be taken into account in analyses of the new design framework. This change of course in worldwide evolution is unified in the following sections.

Cross-cultural dialogue has stopped

Similarly to what happened in the two world wars, when political tragedies unite with economic crisis, nations tend to isolate themselves and the degree of internationalization is reduced.

We are at the critical point in which countries tend to defend themselves from external factors and concentrate on themselves. The political crisis has worsened the recession, which directly affects consumption, has generated uncertainty and spread fear on citizens. Usual life habits have been interrupted: people are spending less and travelling less. Air traffic and tourism industries are experiencing crisis levels.

Old national limits are standing up for their rights and, on increasing border controls, trade is restricted. Security measures have been increased to control the movements of people, particularly in the case of immigration, which is treated with more with police mean than social ones.

This accumulation of situations is generating a way of globalisation which goes against the plurality of the world and multiplicity of cultures, especially regarding minority groups or groups with little power who are treated as if they were species in extinction.

The new policy of globalisation no longer focusses on the expansion of democracy

Although still valid before 11th September, the idea that freedom could be expressed and produce a new order without traumas by giving it democratic conditions has collapsed along with the Towers.

Various nations show a generalised internal imbalance: the classic freedom-security relationship is tipped towards the latter, at the cost of individual guarantees. In the face of international violence, nations are focussing on the expansion of global anti-terrorist networks and hugely increasing security as a priority in all orders.

Citizens, for their part, find themselves obliged to learn the skills of personal defence or to co-operate more with the forces of order. This is producing a climate which only favours the development of xenophobia and the weakening of the legitimacy of justice and individual freedom.

In the West, we are seeing a regression of democratic rules. Military tribunals and the suspension of freedom are testimony to this and, in the name of security and due to emergency, they represent an unsettling alternative future for the citizen.

The control of Information increases

The profound transformations taking place in the field of information denote the existence of a new emerging order which threatens to situate itself above citizenship, politics and democracy itself.

It has not ceased to be unsettling that information technologies, despite all the hopes of them being a great aid to humanity, are becoming a threat and building an unsurmountable barrier between citizens and informa-

tion, be that, because of the emergence of sophisticated information control systems which are configuring a reality according to interests and in the light of which citizens are defenceless and vulnerable. Control of what the public is allowed to know is increasingly surpassing traditional limits of document retention when it was thought that its publication would be socially harmful. What was once «occasional» is now «retained whenever possible». Recent and alarming evidence of the uninformed that threatens us is to be found in the Office of Strategic Influence, discretely set up after 11-S, which has, among other objectives, that of «positioning» news items in international information media which are favourable to the interests of the USA. These news items can be true or false and can affect friend or enemy countries. The OSI is equipped with a wide range of powers to develop all kinds of information and uninformed campaigns, from the darkest to the most transparent.

Uninformed can also be driven by the large amount of information that the new media stores and transmits. It is clear that the great volume of available information does not guarantee that knowledge is structured and that news and ideas are correctly absorbed.

This ease in accumulating and transmitting large quantities of information does facilitate the political practice of systematically hiding information. Currently, the government's secretive attitude is a basic philosophy which is favoured by the media with their «generous and abundant» documentary contributions.

A new world order takes shape

The most outstanding part of this crisis is the change which is operating on the alignment of various nations, and which is shaping a new world order:

The events of the 11th September have entailed a new order on the base of previously unseen international alignments with regard to the USA as the main worldwide power of obliged reference. We have gone from a bipolar world to one which is monopolar.

The recent summit of the EU and the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) in Istanbul «harmony between civilizations» remain distant. The new Project for the New American Century (PNAC), led by William Kristol, has generated a movement with very different intentions. Its doctrine is simple: the USA empire is real and North Americans must accept this imperialism without any complexes. The fear and unrest that the USA is

producing among its allies is a new phenomenon which seriously threatens global security.

In the immediate times of recession, and in the hope that time will allow other world power centres to emerge, three countries appeared as possible recovery engines: India, China and Russia. In spite of their low level of development, the consumer potential of these three countries, close to 3,000 million people, is a great attraction for foreign investments.

Russia has already chosen to be an ally of the West. China, from its ancient position, has remained formally neutral, but agreements with the West are bringing it increasingly closer to this part of the world. Japan, in the middle of an economic crisis, is losing significance, whilst China and Russia are getting stronger. Europe has not defined its foreign policy altogether and the Near East, like the Islamic world, is showing increasingly greater signs of deterioration and instability.

Other Changes

As well as the changes caused by the recent and serious international incidents, there are other foreseeable ones to consider. These go beyond occasional shocks, violent as they may be, due to their belonging to a logical evolution and entailing certain values of modernity. Of particular interest to us among these foreseeable changes are:

Immigratory pressure

The failure of economic, political and social modernization in the majority of third world countries has created certain real or imaginary grievances towards the West which must be taken into account. Coupled to this situation is the flagrant inequality between the privileged and the defenceless of the world which logically entails great immigratory pressure and a rise in terrorist acts. Despair, together with the logical aspiration for a better society, leads to unbridled migratory movements which neither police nor ideological control can prevent.

In the West, then, the presence and mix of other cultures is an irreversible and increasing reality which will modify our customs, oblige us to redefine our values and bring to light many rights that we took for granted.

To do so, we will have to look for solutions to living together which guarantee the legitimate demand for worldwide security. These should not, however, be based on searching for the enemy or increasing military costs and belligerent projects, but on the construction and consolidation of a new model which replaces militarization for prevention. We must find a way to bring the North and South together and make a commitment to the environment.

One particular feature of social change is the fall in the birth rate in the Western world and the need to fill this human gap with the mass entry of immigrants from other cultures which are traditionally distant to our own. Furthermore, we confide in the fact that human life expectancy will increase spectacularly in the immediate future thanks to the prevention of illnesses and a consequent decrease in mortality.

These two phenomena are highly significant to any analysis of the needs of a new intercultural society and must be taken into account when considering design propositions.

The information society

Logically, the change of generation entails social changes which are clearly seen in the progressive substitution of the industrial society for a society of knowledge and information.

This is a new type of society with a clear technological component. It must be suitably adapted to it through investments in infrastructures and training programmes which allow the assimilation of this new culture, and also diminish the social impact of the negative aspects which it occasions.

Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of thinking that only the new activities closely linked to communication technologies fit into the coordinates of the information society. Technology can not be the defining factor of the information process.

Designing the future

We are currently witnessing an era of transformations and reforms. Although their consequences are yet unknown, they will certainly give way to a new order from which we must design a new model which clearly

supports the citizen. This model should resist merchandizing life and steer globalisation towards increasing freedom, respect for the right to live and all citizens' opportunities.

It should be based on mutual knowledge and respect, and on talks concerning different ways of seeing the world. It should favour cultural exchange and the acceptance of others, and move away from the imposition, intolerance and inequality that dominated the last century. We must restore strategies aimed at creating a new global space of progress which blurs the outlines between ethnic groups, religions and borders.

The World Economic Forum and Porto Alegre

In support of this proposal to design the future, it is necessary to bear in mind another recent event which will enable us to foresee a more optimistic reorientation of the globalisation process. This is the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. Having only been in existence for two years, this modest Forum has achieved more notoriety than that gained by the World Economic Forum in Davos, which has been running for thirty years as a platform for the multinationals' liberal politics.

We feared that there was no alternative to the globalisation process, that it was unstoppable and the only way forward. That financial capital had an unanswerable regulating capacity and political power would do no more than facilitate free and capricious money circulation. However, the emergence of the popular Forum in Porto Alegre to compete with the elitist World Economic Forum, has given shape to an alternative mood and has shown the world that there are people who do not accept the path of money as the only path forward, but that this must be designed by a political power which protects general interests.

Globalisation itself is not so much the question, but rather the way to go about it. As Daniel Cohn Bendit said recently (*El País*, 7-2-02), «it is necessary to establish rigorous policies based on another model of economic relations in order to combat the unbearable and suicidal chasm of poverty and extreme misery that more than half of humanity suffers».

Porto Alegre has declared the need to reduce inequalities in and between societies, and to look for a new focus on globalisation in order to gain a fairer world. With concrete proposals, such as cooperation

in favour of development, alternative security and the fight to eradicate poverty and injustice, the Porto Alegre Forum has made itself the most significant point of reference to the desire for autotransformation in future societies.

Some proposals for the future of design

Design has once again to overcome the classic dichotomy between design which is exclusively aimed at an advanced society and of a symbolic nature, and utilitarian non-design which is not even worthy of being seen as cultural. Design must recover its initiative and face up to the challenges entailed in the adoption of a social strategy which permits the construction of new rules of living together and interpreting the world.

It should not be forgotten that industrial objects and images shape social order perceptive systems, even when due to commercial or economic interests they are presented as logical phenomena belonging to a cultural situation and unconnected with their social consequences.

In this sense, and from a socially and politically open point of view, a critical analysis of this superficial and economic conception of design is necessary. It also becomes important to study the profound motivations, their conceptions and the objectives that design of concrete objects that make up the History of Design sustain, and to pick out the conditioning factors and circumstances that justify it. To do so, it is necessary to analyse the interactive process that the historical development of social relations and the productions of industrial images and objects has followed. Only then will we be able to catch a glimpse of the future that the practice of design furnishes us with.

In this respect, these are some of the challenges brought forth by the future of design:

A design respectful to individuals and favouring fairness.

In a time like the present, in that globalisation is one of the main characteristics of capitalism, and in which markets dictate the law and politicians take charge of fulfilling it, design should react to its responsibilities, small as they may seem.

From a humanistic view of the world, in which the human being is at the centre, we must strive to collectively control this new economic-cultural reality and to be aware that:

- Not everything can be an object of commercial transactions.
- It is necessary to reject large concentrations of economic power and their neoliberal principle of converting any relation into a consumer good, of making life itself an object.
- We must avoid the abuse that a global market brings and prevent inequality between citizens. Instead, we should favour fairness, differentiating facts and differing personalities.

Equipping the practice of design with new ethic contents is undoubtedly a difficult task which we can not shy away from. In this sense, we must plan a design policy which is respectful to individuals, avoiding them being degraded to a simple condition of «design bulimics», by which we mean individuals belonging to a society stripped bare of initiatives and spontaneity and who act blindly according to publicity and market orders.

A design for interculturality

Multiculturality is not simply contact between cultures which were previously separated. It forces us to question many of our values and reposition our own culture, moving towards a global culture which is against confrontation and the colonization of other different cultures which until recently were distant.

Closely linked to globalisation, interculturality opens new behavioural areas which require participation, transparency, responsibility and control. As a recent creative phenomenon, multiculturalism will have a huge repercussion in the world of production. Hence, whilst designing within one cultural context alone entails finding the consensus of all the users in this cultural environment, as soon as we begin to move between varying cultural contexts, the design process becomes much more complex. This is due to the fact that a language which goes beyond the mere imposition of a cultural model must be found. The traditional idea of a monolithic, mechanical and imperative order must be replaced with a concept of

complex, random and changing order, more akin to society itself.

Interculturality entails certain requirements and a previously unseen level of demand in the field of design. A global, universal dimension is demanded of products, but they are also required to maintain their identity in a specific local context. From this new demand, the designer will have to reinterpret large global phenomena on a local scale as well as develop those local aspects which are capable of reaching global interest.

In this respect, and unlike mechanical-industrial production, technological development allows mass-produced design which at the same time is personalized: a personalized design which has its roots in the existence of determined situations in the lives of people within one collectivity. This design, which we could call pragmatic, moves away from global solutions for all given that it enables the presentation of one product in alternative designs, depending on the concrete situation in which it is consumed.

However, the consideration of designing universal products for «everybody», immediately brings forth certain questions which we seem unable to answer at present. Can we speak of universal identity? Does, or can, an intercultural culture exist?

An information carrier design

One of the characteristics that distinguishes the human being from other biological systems is his communicative ability, that is, his ability to act in such a way that other individuals or organisms in another time or place can participate in his experiences.

Thanks to this communicative ability, individuals, who we define by their functions and objectives, exchange interpersonal messages in which the communicative roles of transmitting and receiving alternately switch and result in the creation of an immediate and familiar environment. Furthermore, individuals are also the receivers of messages from their social environment, whose interpretation enables us to construct a universe which is fundamental to the social individual.

To give shape to this cultural universe, as well as traditional message transmission media such as the radio, posters, the television and so on, there are a wide range of other ways of transmitting signs. These include communication through dress, body language and

communication via the industrial or declared objects that global society sends to individuals.

As has already been said, in advanced industrial societies the utilitarian value of objects is increasingly more relative. For reasons pertaining basically to the market, this reduction is compensated for with the incorporation of symbolic, informative and poetic values, among others: true indicators of behavioural manners which link the consumer to a determined social group or production system.

Objects of mass consumption, on becoming authentic mediators between mankind and society, or between individuals themselves, provide society with an important means of expressing its culture. Their design varies, but the individual still sees in them certain mediators of social culture.

It would be naive to look upon a car as being purely a method of transportation, or a watch as being a mere indicator of time without any sign value of social status, wealth, success; in short, as belonging to an individual in relation to a social mass.

This communicative role is largely constrained to design. Design creates products which are interpreted inasmuch as they adapt and represent cultural values and consumed in the manner in which allows an individual to express his interests, his lifestyles or to connect himself to determined social spaces and so on.

Thus, the incessant emission of new design discourses should participate in the transformation of society in the manner that it segments it in a novel way and not as a pyramid according to roles and lifestyles, nor through cultural and economic segments in accordance with traditional values and habits.

It does not cease to be surprising that design, in spite of its cultural relevance in making contact between differing worlds and acting as an intermediary between them, plays such a little part in social debate. It is possible that this marginalisation is due to the fact that despite facing an increasingly more intercultural and diverse society, design has yet to give priority to its characteristic of being a carrier, or interface. As an information carrier and landscape shaping instrument, design must become aware of its communicative function and be capable of adopting new languages. The designer has to devise and give shape to new symbols which express and communicate the new values to society. It should facilitate reflection about own or adopted identity and generate new social relations.

A sustainable design

In the consumer society, the production of objects is associated with social well-being. It is believed, or made believe, that the possession of material goods necessarily engenders a better quality of life and a progressive state of social happiness. However, given its simplicity, this relation between the accumulation of goods and happiness can be easily questioned.

We therefore observe how the growth of industrial production, largely fostered by design, has not only not satisfied our needs, but it has plunged us into a wild consumerism reflex. That is to say, in a state of constant overexcitement produced by the desire to consume an offer of aesthetically altered objects, forever in the hope of living our existential condition more intensely. We live in a world of objects which, as A. Petrillo (TdeD: 11) says, «are constantly reabsorbed in a cannibal spectacle which pulverizes and melts everything down».

The state of merchandise deems any design initiative legitimate, providing that it positions itself within consumption coordinates. Design has been losing the globality project commitment that characterised it in its beginnings and has fallen into a partial and elementary process of aestheticization of merchandise. This process is increasingly more sophisticated but is losing its power of suggestion. Industrial beauty alone is no longer capable of producing emotions, nor of answering the problems that arise in today's world.

In contrast, environmental issues are becoming stronger and stonger, and it will not be long before they provoke a substantial change to the design process. It will become increasingly normal for service and product design to take into account issues such as recyclability, energetic efficiency, low waste production and so forth.

Design must occupy an outstanding place among the interests of industrial production and the limitations of natural resources, sole source of supply. This strategic situation gives design, in the widest possible sense of the term, a huge responsibility in environmental problems when it comes to planning synthesis strategies between industrial efficiency and research into sustainability.

The guidelines set out in the United Nations Conference for Development and the Environment, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, to slow down and invert the effect of environmental damage, demand a new design culture based on a kind of development which is compatible

with the environment and sustainable for all countries. A sustainable design framed within the future strategies and the coordinates of postindustrial reality in its globality, defined by a development policy which opposes environmental damage.

A strategy of sustainability must be directed at a way of managing human resources which is compatible with their capacity to reproduce, and adopt much wider and differing considerations of social well-being than just economic growth, with new socio-economic and environmental indicators inspired by the UN's Human Development Index (Daniel Cohn Bendit: *El País*, 7-2-02).

Design's environmental responsibility must therefore be accompanied by a market and industrial policy which takes charge of the need to find harmony between industrial efficiency and the environment, as well as the industrial experiences which have brought about emergencies at the cost of the environment. It must also emphasise the re-use and recycling of materials, rejecting the 'one use' culture and instead encouraging the production of long-lasting objects. An industrial policy which does not limit itself to the study of how to produce, but instead fundamentally questions the why of a determined production.

Nevertheless, and above all, it must be a policy which redefines the ideologies which form the base of our consumer patterns and which does not compromise future generations. That is, a preventative design.

A preventative design

A design which does not adapt to the world of business would have difficulty in surviving. Inasmuch as a source of work, the designer can not live without it. However, on another level, as a reality principle, business is subordinating the role of the designer as a production factor and creator of value.

Logically, a design of these characteristics must take part in the product creation process from the beginning and not limit itself to appearing at an advanced stage when everything is already decided, and then only to provide an aesthetic addition or occasional simple solution to some product deficiency. The designer must become a true specialist in prevention.

Design will be preventative and will take part in product and service creation projects from their start, striving to anticipate the needs and particularities that

will affect the product, and at all times in harmony with the environment.

This new design focus will enable strategic and preventative planning, characterised by its capacity to:

- Adapt the sustainability paradigm to the whole product cycle.
- Incorporate time and futurology as basic axes of a design process, capable of transcending the present and anticipating the varying circumstances of the product's life-cycle, as well as the environmental effects and impacts that it entails.
- Capture or detect new trends, but always applying a policy which respects the future and with the aim of not exceeding its functions so as not to compromise the ability and right of future generations to decide and satisfy their own needs.

Designing systems

In craft production, the craftsman was the cohesive element which gave unity to the product. Industrial production presupposed the specialisation of the process in new, independent realities: market projection, production and consumption. In postindustrial society the production process must recover its unity and create its own social space which puts it within a communicative dynamic.

In this respect, we must support the design of interdisciplinary systems, capable of being applied to any environment. Systems design offers a complete discourse with regard to the receiver interpreting its parts coherently and synthesising its meaning. The question is not to provide isolated, «well-designed» elements, but to enable a synthesis which is coherent with the communicative intentionality of the enunciator.

Thus, the totality of the personality and identity system will be required of design, within which the product is a carrier of certain moral and cultural values. This involves the need to project a unifying device or coherent group which is capable of impregnating the entire system with homogeneity and promoting memorisation and loyalty.

This process entails:

- Achieving a family air, beyond the natural product cycle.
- Transforming the product into a support of identity.

- Creating reliable meanings.
- Proposing a message of satisfaction and improvement.
- Considering the product in its context, from within which it will get its meaning.

Valuation of the product has displaced material issues to focus on the cultural contents that make up its dynamic and suggestive environment. The citizen, situated within this environment with which he shares values, reinforces his personality and according to J. Vinyets, TdD 15:82, undergoes «a double distinction feeling: the first is individual, in the way that he interprets the message from his own culture; and the other is collective, given that the interpretation is shared with other individuals who are carriers of the same sensitivity, which distinguishes them from the rest of the social group».

Digital design

Technologies will play an increasingly greater role as amplifiers and diffusors of information, and they will provoke changes in such fundamental concepts as that of community, consensus and communication, or security and privacy. It is necessary to bestow a level of trust with respect to the key role that information technologies must continue playing in economic and social development in the world.

Like many other production sectors, technology is a factor which has forced specialisation in the field of design. This has led to the appearance of a new speciality: digital design, with all its variants.

Evolution promises spectacular changes in the practice of design. The combination of interactivity, virtual reality and breakthroughs in information technology has generated the appearance of totally digital parallel realities; governed according to systems and previously unseen principles. This opens very wide freedom margins for the designer. Similarly, we can now speak of intelligent design, with regards to products and services which can be adapted to each user's specific circumstances. However, the multiplication and miniaturisation of computers will eventually turn these into an invisible part of daily life.

Having overcome the technology euphoria at the end of the last century and entered the 21st century, the general access to new technologies and via them to information about the world, has brought about two

considerations which directly affect the design of the future.

Currently, we have all kinds of information at our fingertips; communication networks are now world-wide, and the concept of physical distance has disappeared. Blinded by an optimistic vision of technology, we run the risk of abandoning old rational values as if they were useless junk. These values were gained from the time of the Enlightenment through numerous historic efforts and conquests, and include aspects such as the positive levels of dignity, freedom and rationality that make up modern man.

Technological development will thus steer us towards an individualist, nihilist society, with no Utopian or reference values. An informed but passive and senseless society, without so much as a critical spirit.

The second risk is contrary to the first, and Habermas (81:84 and ss) warns us to defend ourselves against it. It concerns a new, genuine type of person: neo-reactionary-conservative, who is horrified by new ways of expressing sensitivity and behaviour. He makes a stand in defence of modern values and conquests, illegitimately setting rationality against individuality, freedom and enjoyment. He has irrational faith in unidirectional technology breakthroughs, which must lead us to an ideal world of well-being, whereby rationality and ethics become true relics.

This neo-reactionary perspective is discretely seen in stylistic cover-ups or, more deeply, differentiating the spheres of science, morality, economy, ethics and so on.

Design and leisure

As computers are increasing their capacity to make decisions about problems, a redistribution of the working day is being produced, displacing time dedicated to work in favour of leisure.

This socio-business phenomena of the information technology society brings forth a number of questions: what happens when a society is far enough advanced technologically to be able to produce all the goods and services that it wants or needs, using only a fraction of the population? Subsequently, will it be necessary to treat work as just another product which must be rationed because of its scarcity by means of cooperation plans, working limitations and so forth?

The increase in human life-expectancy must be added to this situation, as it will also oblige products

to be adapted to the new leisure culture and life expectations. These are two variables which redefine the social composition of the new consumers and the specific requirements of product design which are aimed at this new society.

In specific projection terms, design will have to prioritize issues which were previously considered to be secondary, such as the promotion of:

- General and concrete issues pertaining to culture, as well as,
- New social, environmental, political, ethical, etc. problems.
- Reflective thinking, given that the time to reflect will be greater than the action time.
- Creative thinking in all its aspects.

The return to a 'renaissance' design

By way of synthesis, we shall say that one of the general criticisms we can make about the design we have inherited is that, with its historical effort to adapt objects to the needs previously defined, it has given evidence of a restricted and excessively limited conception of human needs.

The fact that human behaviour is much more complex than a traditional design process assumes must be taken into account. Design needs to identify more with human reality and its environment, and abandon the pretension of predetermining its needs. A product is not consumed merely to satisfy predetermined needs, but rather due to its multiple meanings which contribute to shaping and differentiating social individuals.

It is necessary to recover the concept of the renaissance man and to be aware that the world can no longer be conceived in a compartmental manner with disjointed areas, but that everything forms a unity and an occasional event has repercussions on the rest. Hence, design can no longer be understood as an occasional way of transforming the surroundings; rather, it must shape itself as an action of solidarity which has general repercussions.

It is not possible to solve an occasional design problem without considering the contextual implications that this solution may have. The production of objects and the solution to human needs must be coherently adjusted to the natural ecosystem.

We must therefore reposition design as a global solution practice which fully assumes the will to apply an operative methodology which respects all of the fields and disciplines that make up our natural and cultural landscape, with particular regard to environmental protection.

It is in the field of the environment that design still takes excessively partial stances and restrains itself to an ecological reorientation of what exists. This is often done with a superficial attitude, sustained by almost folkloric sentimentalism and, on the contrary, at other times with a pessimistic and apocalyptic attitude which irretrievably leads to paralysis. Another unnecessary attitude of design springing from a partial conception of reality is that it strives to apply messianic contra-technologies with the aim of neutralizing the negative effects of industrialisation and technology, without considering that the difficulties presented by industrialisation are not fundamentally technological but political and social.

Design and training

One last thought, aimed at the training of the future designer:

We are living a time of transition: from the industrial society we are moving into the information and knowledge society. This transformation will bring immaterial work, the production of sense and effectiveness to the foreground, and will force us to adapt to these new parameters. To do so, we must produce creative design which contributes to the making of culture, this being understood as a group of immaterial factors which define a human collective. A type of design which occupies new spaces with a new organisational structure, as a system of citizen participation.

Knowledge is already the main differentiating aspect in modern economic activity. New technologies facilitate easy access to information, and this technology is already largely within everybody's reach. What is not widely available is its capacity to generate ideas and values. This will be the new differentiating factor in the practice of design.

It is for this reason that design must restructure its activities with respect to knowledge capital, and manage it in all its fields in order to generate ideas. However, having ideas is not enough; it is necessary to use a rigorous methodology to put them in practice and

improve creativity. This implies a new pedagogical framework which is capable of providing future designers and entrepreneurs with:

- A large capacity of transversatility, balanced with a good capacity of synthesis. It will only be that current, complex design problems and their diverse fields of knowledge are fully known, that it will be possible to coordinate multidisciplinary design teams and adequately synthesise their contents.
- Enough analytical capacity to be able to deconstruct the current aesthetic-consumerist vision of design, and construct new of behaviour models which lead to design solutions which are synthetic and effective for the human being.
- A high level of technological knowledge, in tune with the development of a creative feeling that enables the development of original alternatives which are of general interest.
- A vocation of social actor, with a high sense of responsibility which takes design as a system into consideration, that is, as a product which takes its meaning from its use in a real context.
- A special sensibility to be able to contribute to sustained development which brings market interests and environmental respect into harmony. Designing must be synonymous with taking into consideration the depletion of natural resources, and of the effects that the design proposal will have on the environment that sustains our life.